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A STUDY OF JOHN 1:29-34

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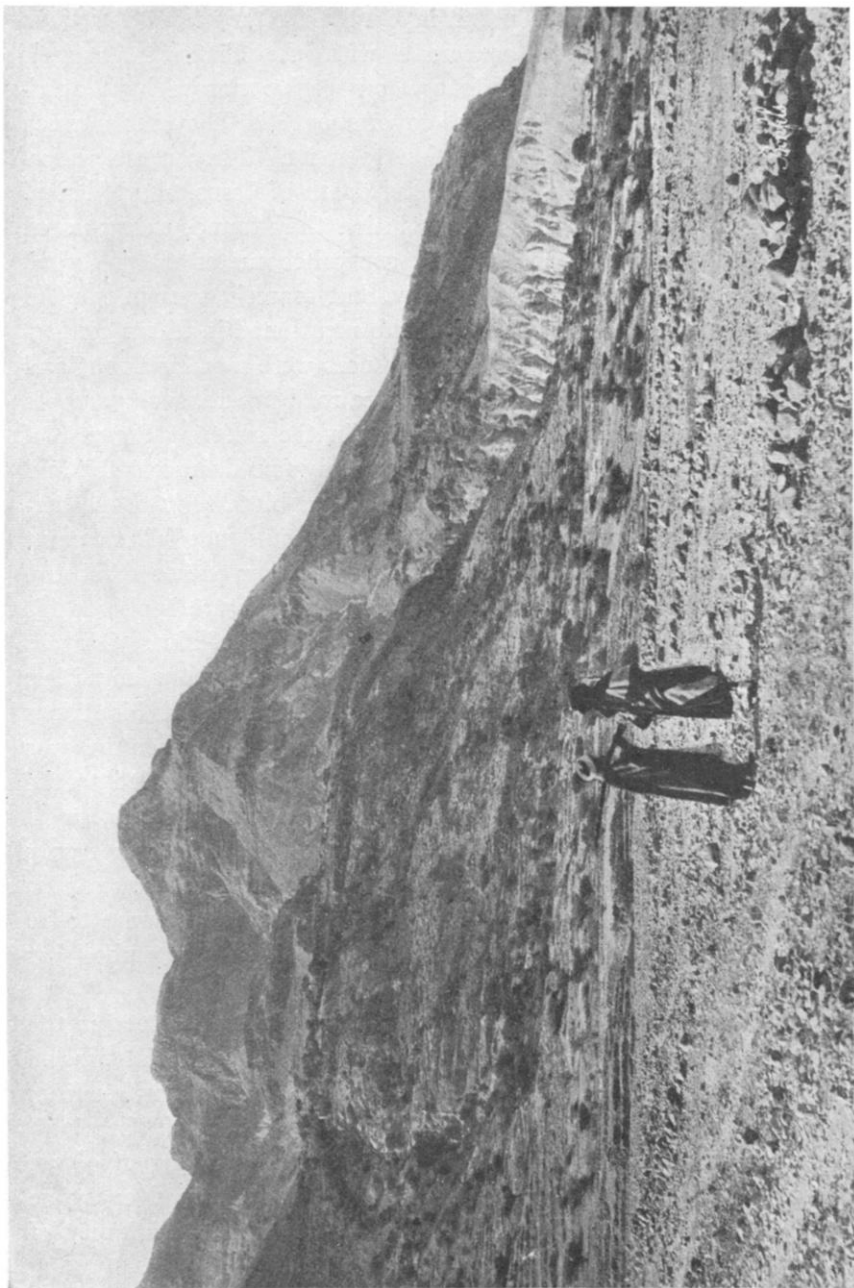
29. On the morrow he seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold, the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world! 30. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man who is become before me: for he was before me. 31. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, for this cause came I baptizing in water. 32. And John bare witness, saying, I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and it abode upon him. 33. And I knew him not; but he that sent me to baptize in water, he said unto me, Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and abiding upon him, the same is he that baptizeth in the Holy Spirit. 34. And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.

John, like all the other gospels, begins by introducing the Baptist. In this gospel, however, the Baptist is not the great human leader, but the witness, sent from on high, who realizes from the beginning his subordinate place. In 1:29-34 we have his positive testimony to Jesus, following directly upon his negative testimony (vss. 19-29) in regard to himself. Let us look first at the verses in detail, then at the paragraph as a whole.

Vs. 29, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The word "behold" or "see" makes the picture more vivid. The frequent references in this gospel to seeing, looking, or beholding mark it as being, in distinction from the Synoptics, the visual gospel. Observe in this passage the words, "made manifest," in vs. 31, and "I have beheld," in vs. 32. The phrase, "The Lamb of God," is an echo of Isa. 53:7 (cf. Acts 8:32). The Passover also is in mind, and the expression reflects, still further, the conception already popular with John's public, of the humble and lowly character of Jesus. Just what conception of the sacrificial nature of Christ's death was in the mind of the Baptist or of the evangelist or of early Christians in general is a question needing detached and detailed investigation. The article by Professor George F. Moore on "Sacrifice" in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* is an important contribution to this

study. But it is to be borne in mind that the early Christians were not immediately concerned with the abstract Anselmic problem, "How can a righteous God forgive sins without detriment to his justice or his moral government?" They had a much more pressing and vital situation to meet. They must understand and account for the shameful death of Jesus, the Messiah. That was their problem. The solution they found, as expressed by John, was, in common with the general character of this gospel, pictorial. It is not enough to say that scarcely ever in the Old Testament sacrificial codes is a lamb mentioned in direct connection with sins; for even if the references were more frequent and even if the theological connection were really there, such passages would still afford no vivid picture. In the suffering Servant of Isa. 53, on the other hand, John not only found the "lamb" and the "sin" in every verse, but found them blended into one surpassing picture, which his picture-gospel could not fail to paint anew. And this ancient picture solved the then present problem. Therefore John exhibited it anew, and the picture spoke to his readers; and by being connected with Jesus said of him: "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. . . . He was oppressed, yet when he was afflicted he opened not his mouth; as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." We must here think, further, not only of Jesus' death, but of all which Jesus himself said about sheep in his public teaching. As his disciples, for example, were to be like sheep among wolves, so Jesus was pre-eminent in embodying the grandeur of guilelessness and natural simplicity.

"Taketh away the sin of the world" is to be understood in the light of I John 3:5, 6, which tells us that in Christ we no longer sin, for we enter into fellowship with Christ who is free from sin, and abide in that fellowship. The conception of "bearing" our sins is also included in the etymological meaning of *αἵρων*, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."



IN THE WILDERNESS OF JUDEA

Vs. 30, "For he was before me," probably refers to the pre-existence of Jesus. In these and the following verses the most important point to be noticed historically is the fact that we have here traces of a polemic against the sect of John the Baptist (cf. Acts 18:25) which we know existed in considerable force even into the second century. Our evangelist has noted with even more clearness than the synoptists the Baptist's own testimony: He (Jesus) is utterly and entirely before me (vs. 30). My work is subordinate and secondary to his (vs. 31). My divine mission declared I should be secondary (vs. 33). My place is merely to bear witness (vss. 32, 34). Compare especially the preceding paragraph (vss. 19-29) in which the Baptist answers again and again "I am not" the coming One.

Vs. 32, "As a dove." In the synoptic gospels it is Jesus who sees the dove. Here the dove is seen by John. It makes the picture more real to have John's objective testimony that he also saw it. Much that is in the nature of a quickly taken photograph in the synoptic Gospels, becomes in John a finished painting.

Vs. 33, "Baptize in [or, with] water." The repeated reference to water baptism (vss. 26, 31) has a polemic connection. The baptism with the Holy Spirit is to be understood in the light of Paul's thought of the Holy Spirit. "If we live by the Spirit, by the Spirit let us also walk." John also thinks, as he writes these words of the Baptist, of that Pentecostal scene when the disciples "were all filled with the Holy Spirit."

Vs. 34, "Son of God." To understand the meaning of this term for the first readers of our gospel we again look to Paul and his conception of the sonship of believers to God. Christ was the Son who brought that sonship into the world and made it possible for men to become sons of God. Historically its use in connection with the Messiah took its rise from such ideas as are expressed in II Sam. 7:13, 14, "He shall build a house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom. I will be his father, and he shall be my Son." It is impossible in this brief article even to suggest the wide use of the term "Son of God" in Jewish and early Christian literature (see Hastings, *Dict. of the Bible*, s.v. "Son of God"). Though not in the Old Testament distinctively a title

for the Messiah, the use of it in Pss. 2 and 89 might easily become the occasion of its application to the Messiah. When Jesus spoke of himself as the Son this would readily, though not necessarily, be understood as implying his messiahship. It is not the equivalent of "Messiah," but denotes a moral and spiritual relationship by which Jesus is the direct representative of God in the world. "The Son can do nothing of himself but what he seeth the Father doing, for what things soever he doeth, these the Son also doeth in like manner" (John 5:19).

Looking at this paragraph as a whole it is important to bear in mind the general character of the gospel. What we call the gospel of John is not a Fourth gospel in the same sense in which the previous three are gospels. It is not "another of the same." They are biographies. It is a picture or series of pictures. To harmonize them with it or it with them topographically and chronologically is beside the mark. One may harmonize the first three among themselves if he thinks it worth while. But who can so cut up a *picture* as to interline the pieces with the story they glorify?

Nor can a picture be appreciated with one's face at the canvas. It is not enough to say that DuBœuf's "Prodigal Son" was not another version of the parable, or that the "Sixtine Madonna" is not another account of the divine motherhood; but we must also add that, as is actually done with such paintings, it must be placed in a room by itself with the spectator seated at a proper distance from the portrayal. For the Fourth Gospel does not "trace accurately" the course of all things in Jesus' life in order that any Theophilus may possess an account of them characterized by itemized certainty. But it was written—one might almost say painted—that the man who believed—one might almost say saw—should have life.

Not that the Fourth Gospel is to be gazed at with a blank and dreamy mind. It is to be examined as a masterpiece in painting is examined, not with the yardstick or with instruments of precision, but with the artist's long brooding over every line and stroke of beauty, grace, and power, and with that occasional standing-back which allows the strokes to dissolve and blend into

a living whole which seems to forget its own home on the canvas and approach and enter and possess the contemplating soul.

I have said all this in order to indicate the peculiar and proper organ with which to read the present verses. That organ is the spiritual eye. Many a devout soul has read it so and filled his soul with its wealth of meaning; while at the same time, if questioned about his vision, would answer in the dialect of history or



SHEPHERDS CROSSING THE JORDAN

biography. Yet "he baptized him" is not here. There is no direct assertion of the baptism of Jesus in these verses. To say this may be startling, so powerfully does a true picture seem to assert the facts out of which its creation has arisen. But it is true. It was a great artist who painted one bird singing and tilting on a single bough of a tree in such an attitude that everyone knew that its mate and its nest were back there inside the foliage, and with such effect that a child came away saying he had seen a painting of a bird with its nest in a tree, though only the solitary warbler was really painted. There is here no picture of Jesus

in the water, and yet we are sure we have seen the baptism itself. It is common enough and true enough to say that the Fourth Gospel assumes the Synoptic Gospels, but we need to go further and to say that the Fourth Gospel reminds us that we have read the synoptists or, to put it still more strongly, makes us feel their facts behind its pictures and feel them so strongly that again and again we think that it actually states them even where it really does not.

Nor must we be beguiled into leaving our attitude of beholding a picture and betaking ourselves to floating down a stream of logic or philosophy. This caution is made needful by certain expressions in our passage. The phrase "Lamb of God" is apt to recall expiatory and vicarious theories, the phrase "Son of God," philosophic conceptions of the Trinity, or of some eternal procession from the Father. However true and helpful such procedures of systematic thinking may be, we must in reading the Fourth Gospel vigorously and rigorously and resolutely preserve the attitude of beholding. John's picture does indeed maintain the closest intimacy with Paul's logic. But it is unhistorical to translate the picture into the logic. We have been too fond of saying that there are two things in the New Testament—the evangelistic biographies and the Pauline doctrines. It would be wiser and truer, even to the chronology of the writings themselves, to say that there are not two things but three: first, the synoptic reports of the daily life of the Son of Man; secondly, the apostolic doctrines of the spiritual Christ no longer known after the flesh; and thirdly, the return to the concrete again in the Fourth Gospel. This last concrete renewal *pictures* the spiritual or Pauline Christ living out during his ministry the spiritual side of his life; and the vital question is not how accurate the precise human details of the picture may be but whether we see the spiritual portrayal which the details are used to paint.

The fact that the Fourth Gospel brings us into close communion with the inmost heart of Christ is its glory, as its stained pages in the believer's Bible clearly show. It is the popular gospel because it gives in the form of pictures, not outward doings so much as the deepest soul of Jesus. The ordinary visitor does not see the full

depth of meaning in the Sixtine Madonna. But he sees its main outstanding thought because it is a picture. The depth of it may come later or may not, but meanwhile the man has seen much. And if anyone should insist that the synoptists also paint us pictures of Christ, the reply is ready: There are painters and painters. One copies faithfully the external features and details of his subject. Another

poring on a face
Divinely through all hindrance finds the man
Behind it, and so paints him that his face,
The shape and color of a mind and life
Lives for his children, ever at its best
And fullest.

Thus John's pictures are the highest and truest appreciation of Christ. To see them we must not be in the uncertain mood of one who feels persuaded of the truth of certain propositions on vicarious sacrifice nor even of one who believes in the divinity of Christ or even of one who has an honest personal faith in him. These processes are important, but in religion the great and final thing a human soul must do is to see. The man who reads our passage best is

One in whom persuasion and belief
Have ripened into faith, and faith become
A passionate intuition.

Such a state of passionate intuition John had reached. And as if with the very cry of the Baptist he himself cries in this passage not "This is the true Petrine or Pauline doctrine of a divine lamb without spot or blemish offered once for all for the sin of mankind," but "*Behold*, the lamb of God"; and again, not "This man has been proven and declared to be the eternal Son," but "See, as I have seen, and bear witness that this is the Son of God."

If then we try to paint the picture John saw we have no easy task before us. It will not do to portray the gaunt and sinewy forerunner pointing out Jesus and seeming to say, "*Behold*, the lamb of God" and to add in, as best we may, the details set forth in the remaining verses. That would be like a true Romanist painting the mother of Christ as she appeared in actual life rather

than as the Sixtine Madonna. But rather as in Madonna pictures cherub forms and faces seem to make the very atmosphere, so the associations of these verses must somehow be suggested, for the picture after all is a spiritual one and can be painted only upon the shifting canvas of the soul. It is really Jesus who is in the foreground. And coming into atmospheric form about him are images



IN THE PLAIN OF THE JORDAN

from the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah—outlines of a lamb led to the slaughter woven in with dim figures of transgressing multitudes (vs. 29). Behind this central foreground figure which “is become before” the forerunner is the lesser figure of the Baptist himself touched with a suggestion of spiritual passing and fading out such as artists sometimes actually impart to figures whose vanishing they wish to indicate (vs. 30). Off at the right of the

canvas is a shadowy Jordan and a shadowy John baptizing repentant throngs; and even as he baptizes a far-off look is in his eyes, and his raised hand points at the great Christ and his own diminishing self in the foreground, even as old artists with spiritual perception would paint upon the same canvas a picture of Christ upon the cross, and then in a dim background a multitude with palms and hosannas around another figure of the Christ which points with profound suggestion to the figure on the cross (vs. 31). But upon the particular individual whom the shadowy John is baptizing at this pictured moment is resting, with wings barely folded, a dove-like form. One must not go closer to examine it for fear it might lose its outlines in the threads and pigments of the canvas; and yet about it, dimmer still, are faint forms of winged things brooding over a tossing primeval chaos or hovering over the receding waters that reveal a newly-emerging and purified earth (vs. 32). The space on the left of the picture is given over to the yet unfeatured future. One can see, nevertheless, clear suggestions of the morning light shining upon the many-colored garments of a newly-gathered crowd in the streets of Jerusalem. There are many nationalities among them, yet all seem to be hearing the same universal story from a few men upon whose glowing brows seem to linger tongues of linguistic fire, as if to symbolize the spirit with which they have been baptized for their great utterance (vs. 33). And underneath the whole picture in the words of the Baptist, expressing the thought of the evangelist, is the legend, "This is the Son of God."